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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the outcomes of a study that investigated the competencies of 49 special educators on a set of 35 skills identified by the Council for Exceptional Children as important for professionals working in the area of special education. The self-reported competencies of special educators were compared with the competencies on the same set of skills as reported by 43 special education directors and 63 general education administrators. Results found that of the 24 skills for which a statistically significant relationship between group and responses was found, special educators reported lower overall levels of competency than with either of the other two subgroups. While they reported higher levels of competency than did general education administrators on 13 skills, they also reported lower levels of competency than did general education administrators on 11 skills. Special education directors reported higher levels of competency than did special educators on all but three skills. Special educators reported being adequate to skilled in assessment, developing appropriate programs, and collaboration. Special educators reported low levels of competency for technology-related skills and managing student behavior. Implications for the preparation of special educators are also discussed. (Contains 32 references.) (CR)

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The Special Education Competencies of Special Educators

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A paper presented at the annual conference of the
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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the competencies of special educators on a set of 35 skills identified by the Council for Exceptional Children as important for professionals working in the area of special education. The self-reported competencies of special educators are compared with the competencies on the same set of skills as reported by special education directors and general education administrators. The implications of the findings for the preparation of special educators and for special education programs and services in K-12 schools are discussed.

The Special Education Competencies

of Special Educators

The current trend to include more and more students with special needs in the general education setting has generated anxiety among both special educators and general classroom teachers (Reganick, 1993). Both general classroom teachers and special educators are concerned about the effects of inclusion upon the educational efficiency and efficacy of the general classroom, as well as their own abilities to handle the new demands that inclusion places upon them (Cates & Yell, 1994; Fishkin & Sullivan, 1993; Siegel & Moore, 1994; Wigle & Wilcox, 1997). The debate concerning the relative merits of including students with disabilities in general education classrooms has at times generated more heat than light (Biklen, Lehr, Searl & Taylor, 1987; Lipsky & Gartner, 1991; W. Stainback & S. Stainback, 1991; S. Stainback, W. Stainback & Forest, 1989; Stewart, 1990; Strully, 1986; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990). And the debate has been slow to have an impact on current state standards for professional licensure. Programs to prepare teachers for schools are guided and accredited by a variety of state and national agencies that oversee content and delivery of teacher preparation programs. Professional-standards boards have been set up in states such as Nevada, Michigan, Montana, West Virginia, and Oregon to generate and monitor the standards for professional practice in education. However, very few of the standards of these agencies address dealing with students with disabilities, nor do they address in specific ways the issues of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), inclusion, and how to best prepare teachers for inclusive classrooms (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 1995; Division for Learning Disabilities [DLD], 1993; Ellis, 1993; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 1995; Wigle & Wilcox, 1996).

The LRE component of P.L. 94-142, the Regular Education Initiative (REI) of 1985, the implementation of AMERICA 2000 of 1991, and the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997 have given public schools the charge to educate "everyone among us." With the growing trend toward including more and more students with disabilities in the general education setting, there has been a gradual emergence of new standards for special educators within their own professional association. As a result of such developments, the roles of both general classroom teachers and special educators are changing (Council for Exceptional Children, 1995; Lombardi, 1991; Wigle & Wilcox, 1996). Whether education professionals are being prepared adequately for their new roles is an important question. It was the belief of the authors of the present study that an important first step towards answering that question would be to investigate the competencies that inservice special educators perceive that they have.

The objective of this study is to investigate the competencies of special educators on a set of 35 skills identified by the Council of Exceptional Children as being important to professionals working in special education. The competencies reported by special educators are compared to the competencies on the same set of skills as reported by special education directors and general education administrators. The self-reported competencies of these three groups and any differences between them are discussed in terms of their implications for special education programs and services in K-12 schools and in terms of their implications for the preparation of special educators.

Method

A survey was developed based upon 35 skills identified by the Council for Exceptional Children as being important for administrators working in the area of special education (Council for Exceptional Children, 1997) (see Table 3). Each skill was used as an item to which the respondent was to indicate his/her level of competency by checking

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either (1) skilled, (2) adequate, or (3) inadequate. The directions of the survey indicated that "skilled" meant that the individual completing the form felt that he/she had mastered a listed skill and could apply it easily and accurately; "adequate" was indicated to mean that the individual completing the form felt that he/she could apply a listed skill, but not as easily or as accurately as someone who had mastered the skill; "inadequate" was indicated to mean that the individual completing the form had not developed a listed skill and so could not apply it with any degree of reliability.

One set of 240 surveys were sent to a sample of general education administrators, another 240 surveys were sent to a sample of special education directors, and a final set of 240 surveys were sent to a sample of special educators. For each group in the study, sixty names were chosen randomly from the states of Nebraska, Tennessee, Kansas, and Texas using state school directories. In addition to the self-reported competencies of individuals in each group, the surveys collected such demographic data as level of education, years of experience, chronological age, and gender. A cover letter explained the intent of the survey and requested that the survey be completed and returned.

Of the 240 surveys sent to general education administrators, 63 were returned for a response rate of 26%. Of the 240 surveys sent to special education directors, 43 were returned for a response rate of 18%. Of the 240 surveys sent to special educators, 49 were returned for a response rate of 20%. Of the 720 total surveys sent out, 155 usable surveys were returned for an overall response rate of 22%. Table 1 summarizes the number of returned surveys and the response rates of each group in each state involved in this study.

Insert Table 1 About Here

After the completed surveys were received, the data for each group were sorted according to the demographic information included on the surveys. The number of responses at each level of competency for each skill for each group were counted. A mean level of self-reported competency for each skill was computed for each group. Lastly, because the data in this study are nominal measures, chi-square tests for contingency tables were computed to determine whether or not a significant relationship existed between the groups and their responses to each listed skill.

The fact that all of the data in this study are derived from individuals who chose to voluntarily participate and that the overall response rate from the target population was relatively low (22%), represents a selection bias. The threat to the external validity of a study that is posed by such a selection bias is well documented (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). In addition, this study examined relationships between groups of individuals and their self-reported competencies in given skill areas. Therefore, it was not possible to draw any causal conclusions from the data obtained. It will be important to remain mindful of the limitations of this study in order to avoid over generalizing its results. However, even given these limitations, the value of this study lies in the fact that it represents a sample of education professionals across several states and that it offers some insight into various important competencies of groups of professionals who have great potential to impact students with disabilities in significant ways (Wigle & Wilcox, in press).

Results

The majority of individuals in this study were both well-educated and experienced professionals. Fifty-three per cent of the special educators had a Master's degree, while all of the special education directors as well as all of the general education administrators had a Master's degree or more. Fifty five per cent of the special educators reported having more than 11 years of experience, and 58% of the special education directors reported

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reported having more than 11 years of experience. Over half of the general education administrators (55%) reported having more than 11 years of experience while 22% of this group reported having between 21-30 years of experience and 6% of this group reported having more than 30 years of experience. The gender division was relatively uneven for two of the subgroups in this study. The balance between males and females was fairly even for special education directors (53% male, 47% female). However, 76% of the special educators were female, and 65% of the general education administrators were male. Table 2 provides information regarding the complete demographic breakdown of the subjects involved in this study.

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Insert Table 2 About Here

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The chi-square tests for contingency tables found statistically significant relationships between groups and responses in 24 of the 35 skills listed on the survey . The relationship between groups and the responses for nine of the skills (numbers 10, 11, 13, 14, 18, 24, 29, 30 and 35),were not found to be significant at the .05 probability level or above. Two of the skills (numbers 21 and 28) could not be analyzed due to insufficient responses on the part of the groups (see Table 3).

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Insert Table 3 About Here

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Of the 24 skills for which a statistically significant relationship between group and responses was found, special educators reported lower overall levels of competency than either of the other two subgroups in the study. While they reported higher levels of competency than did general education administrators on 13 skills, they also reported

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lower levels of competency than did general education administrators on 11 skills. The comparisons between the reported levels of competency of special educators and special education directors is even more striking. In fact, for those skills on which a statistically significant relationship was found between groups and responses, special education directors reported higher levels of competency than did special educators on all but three (numbers 4, 6, and 7) (see Table 3).

The levels of self-reported competency (skilled, adequate, inadequate) within each group in this study were equally as interesting as the differences found between the groups. Special educators reported lower levels of competency than did either special education directors, or general education administrators. When the percentages of responses across all skills were examined, it was found that special educators reported their level of competence as skilled in only 32% of their responses, as adequate in 48% of their responses, and as inadequate in 20% of their responses. In contrast, general education administrators reported their level of competence as skilled in 26% of their responses, as adequate in 56% of their responses, and as inadequate in only 18% of their responses (see Table 4).

The levels of competency reported by the special education directors were overall the highest of all three groups. The mean response for special education directors was not greater than 1.99 (adequate to skilled) on any of the skills except number 10, on which the mean response was 2.07 (adequate). In addition, when the percentages of responses across all skills were examined, it was found that special education directors reported their level of competence as skilled in 48% of their responses, as adequate in 44% of their responses, and as inadequate in only 8% of their responses (see Table 4).

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Insert Table 4 About Here

As indicated by the data in this study, special education directors generally saw themselves as more skilled than adequate, and far more adequate than inadequate, in their skills. In contrast, general education administrators and special educators more often saw themselves as adequate rather than skilled as they responded to each of the listed skills. However, special educators not only reported their levels of competency as inadequate on a significantly greater percentage of skills (20%) than did special education directors (8%), but they also reported their levels of competency as inadequate on a slightly higher percentage of the listed skills than did even general education administrators (18%). Given the relatively higher level of preparation and experience on the part of special education directors, the differences between special education directors and special educators might have been expected. However, given that special educators generally have more academic preparation as well as significantly more experience in special education than do general education administrators, the differences between the special educators and the general education administrators in this study are surprising. These findings have various implications both for special education programs as well as for the preparation of special educators .

Discussion

Special educators fill a wide range of very important roles in special education programs (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1991). As a result, if they are going to be effective in their roles, special educators need to have an array of some very important skills. The data reported above suggest that the special educators in this study perceive themselves as

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having relatively high levels of competence in several of the skill areas identified as being important to professionals working in the area of special education. However, the data also suggest that the special educators in this study often perceive themselves as lacking in some of these important skills.

The mean levels of competency reported by special educators in the three general areas of assessment (Skill Areas 6, 7), developing appropriate programs (Skill Areas 4, 12, 13, 20), and collaboration (Skill Areas 29, 30, 31, 35) indicated that the individuals in this subgroup perceived their levels of competency as being adequate to skilled in these areas. This is a positive finding because these skill areas are central components of the overall professional roles of special educators. Assessment of students with disabilities is used to identify student characteristics and needs, determine eligibility for special services, plan for instruction, evaluate student progress and predict future academic and non-academic needs (Hoy & Gregg, 1994). Reliable, valid, and appropriate assessment is the beginning of the entire process by which the needs of students and their families are met (McLoughlin & Lewis, 1994). In addition to being competent in the area of assessment, special educators must also be able to modify curricula and materials and adapt instructional approaches in order to meet the needs of a diverse array of students with disabilities. The ability to develop instructional programs that are appropriate to the needs of the students being served is the foundation upon which the efficacy of intervention rests (Olson & Platt, 1996). Lastly, given a greater emphasis on inclusive practices in P-12 schools, the ability to collaborate with administrators, general classroom teachers, and families of students is an important factor in the success that special educators have when serving students with disabilities (Cates & Yell, 1994; Kaufman, 1994; Wigle & Wilcox, 1997). That the special educators in this study indicated relatively high levels of competency in these areas is an indication of the confidence they have in their ability to meet some of the challenging

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demands they face in special education. However, that confidence did not appear to be felt for all of the listed skill areas.

While reporting several skill areas in which they had relatively high levels of competence, the special educators in this study also reported some skill areas in which they had relatively low levels of competency. Specifically, the levels of competency reported by special educators on technology-related skills (Skill Areas 10, 17, and 22) were lower than either special education directors or general education administrators. Further, the mean levels of competency reported by special educators for these skills tended to be greater than 2.00 (adequate to inadequate). These findings are troubling because the ability to implement technology with students with disabilities (Skill 10), the ability to develop and implement professional development plans in the area of technology (Skill 17), and the ability to use technology to enhance the management of resources (Skill 22) are all skills that are of great importance to the efficacy of special education programs. Research suggests that students with disabilities tend to benefit more from computers than average or above-average students (Bulkeley, 1997). However, if technology is going to be able to fulfill its promise for students with disabilities, then effective staff development programs will need to be developed for those teachers who struggle with the appropriate application of technology to classroom learning (Cwilik, 1997). Yet these are the skill areas in which the special educators in this study perceived themselves to be at least partly inadequate.

In addition to technology-related skills, special educators also reported lower levels of competency than did general education administrators in the important area of managing student behavior. This is a particularly disturbing finding because the ability to develop and implement a discipline policy for students with disabilities (Skill Area 23), the ability promote positive behavior in students with disabilities (Skill Area 24), the ability to implement conflict resolution plans (Skill Area 27), and the ability to develop parent and

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family education programs (Skill Area 26) concerning the management of student behavior are of critical importance for the long-term growth and development of students with disabilities (Voyles, 1997). Students who do not learn to manage their behavior in appropriate ways face a variety of very serious consequences throughout their lives. Such students have difficulty in cooperating and working with others, they have difficulty learning or even functioning in classrooms, and they tend to manifest deficits in social skills (Williams, Walker, Holmes, Todis, & Fabre, 1989). Such problems are further complicated as these individuals transition from school into adulthood. They often lack the education or the skills to enter the job market or make a living wage and, as adults, they often face poverty and marginal living conditions (Edgar, 1987). It is, therefore, of critical importance that special educators have the skills necessary to help students with disabilities learn appropriate and effective ways to manage their behavior. And given the changes which relate to student behavior that have been implemented in IDEA (1997), special educators will need ever greater skills and abilities in this area to make sure that students with disabilities who engage in disruptive behavior receive appropriate educational interventions. However, as with technology-related skills, this is an area in which the special educators in this study perceive their levels of competency to be at least somewhat inadequate.

Conclusion

The implications of this study for the preparation of special educators are two. First, college and university preparation programs should continue to stress the skills related to assessment, collaboration, and special education program development. These are skills that are critical to the success of special educators and these are skills that colleges and universities currently seem to be adept at helping preservice special education

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professionals develop. Second, college and university programs need to improve the skills of their preservice special educators in the area of educational technology and the area of behavior management. Technology and its appropriate applications to classroom learning will become ever more important and ever more complex in the coming decade. Its potentially positive impact on students with disabilities make it imperative that special educators be much more skilled in this area than they presently perceive themselves to be. With the reauthorization of IDEA bringing greater focus on student behavior, the consequences of not being skilled at helping students with disabilities learn appropriate ways to manage their behavior are extremely serious. That this skill area carries with it such serious implications for students is a vitally important reason for special educators to be much more skilled in this area than they perceived themselves to be in this study.

That the special educators in this study indicated relatively high levels of competency in various important skill areas is an indication of the appropriateness and efficacy of both preservice preparation programs as well as inservice professional development activities for special educators. The fact that many special educators see themselves as lacking in some of these important skills should be a real concern to all professionals who have responsibility for special education programs. If a professional does not have appropriate levels of competency in various important skill areas, their decisions and actions may very well result in outcomes which lower the effectiveness of special education programs and result in serious consequences for the students served by those programs.

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Table 1

Response Rate By State

State	Sp.Ed. Directors		Gen. Ed. Amins.		Special Educators	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Tennessee	5	8	8	13	9	15
Texas	12	20	8	13	8	13
Kansas	10	17	21	35	17	28
Nebraska	16	27	26	43	15	25
Totals	43	18	49	20	63	26

Table 2

Description of Sample

	Special Ed. Directors		Gen Ed. Amins.		Special Educators	
Educational Level	N	%	N	%	N	%
Ed.D./Speciialist	17	40	18	29	0	0
Master	26	60	45	71	26	53
Bachelor	0	0	0	0	23	47
Years of Experience	N	%	N	%	N	%
1-5	10	23	15	24	13	27
6-10	8	19	13	21	9	18
11-15	10	23	8	13	11	23
16-20	10	23	9	14	10	20
21-30	5	12	14.	22	6	12
30+	0	0	4	6	0	0
Age	N	%	N	%	N	%
25-30	0	0	1	2	7	14
31-40	5	12	7	11	16	33
41-50	26	60	27	43	19	39
51-60	10	23	23	37	7	14
60+	2	5	5	7	0	0
Gender	N	%	N	%	N	%
Male	23	53	41	65	7	14
Female	20	47	14	22	37	76
No Answer	0	0	8	13	5	10

Table 3

Relationship Between Groups and Responses By Skill Area

Skill Area	Special Ed. Directors M Response	Principals M Response	Special Ed. Teachers M Response	Chi-Square	P-Value
1. Communicate an inclusive vision to various constituencies	1.67	1.97	1.92	10.336	.03
2. Interpret case law, & federal, state, local policies	1.51	2.22	2.14	35.320	.0001
3. Plan, communicate, and negotiate student and family needs and programs	1.43	2.02	1.89	20.952	.0003
4. Develop and implement programs that respond to individual and family characteristics	1.74	2.03	1.68	9.994	.04
5. Advocate for the inclusion of individuals with exceptionalities	1.50	1.89 *	1.80	10.641	.03
6. Implement an assessment program for individuals with exceptionalities	1.95	2.29	1.57	37.118	.0001
7. Understand and interpret data/information about individual students	1.71	2.00	1.63	10.115	.03
8. Ensure that outcomes for individuals with exceptionalities are addressed in general system standards and curriculum.	1.74	2.24	2.02	17.072	.001
9. Develop and implement strategies for professional development for teachers of students with exceptionalities	1.51	1.81	1.93	11.154	.02
10. Develop and implement a technology plan for teachers of students with exceptionalities	2.07	2.03	2.12	2.882	.57*
11. Assist in development of curriculum and instructional models for all students	1.67	1.85	1.81	3.738	.44*
12. Develop collaborative general and special education programs	1.42	1.98	1.48	25.458	.001
13. Ensure that decisions and management procedures provide appropriate services to students with exceptionalities	1.42	1.52	1.72	7.057	.13*
14. Develop and implement ongoing evaluations of special ed. programs	1.70	1.92	2.00	5.295	.25*
15. Develop and implement interagancey agreements	1.67	2.29	2.33	27.770	.0001
16. Develop and implement flexible service delivery programs	1.60	2.03	1.98	15.932	.003
17. Develop and implement professional development program that include use of technology	1.88	1.92	2.26	9.207	.05
18. Develop strategic plans that provide opportunities for collaboration across programs & agencies	1.75	1.85	1.98	7.505	.11*

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Table 3, continued

19. Develop district budgets and procure funding to ensure effective allocation of resources	1.43	2.29	2.60	53.206	.0001
20. Develop building level supports for inclusive educational settings	1.62	1.71	1.77	10.899	.02
21. Develop and implement transition plans	insufficient data	insufficient data	insufficient data		
22. Use a variety of technologies to ehance management of resources	1.81	2.02	2.14	10.407	.03
23. Develop and implement a district discipline policy for students with exceptionalities	1.48	1.82	1.83	14.255	.006
24. Support individual school sites in implementing a range of strategies that promote positive behavior	1.60	1.87	1.94	8.472	.07*
25. Implement a variety of procedures to ensure clear communication among administrators and personnel	1.57	1.77	1.98	11.028	.02
26. Develop parent/family education programs	1.88	2.20	2.35	12.220	.01
27. Implement conflict resolution programs	1.85	1.92	2.28	12.448	.01
28. Develop and support communication and collaboration with educational & other agencies	insufficient data	insufficient data	insufficient data		
29. Collaborate and engage in shared decision-making to support programs for students with exceptionalities	1.38	1.63	1.55	7.108	.13*
30. Develop and provide effective communication with parents and families of individuals with exceptionalities	1.50	1.73	1.49	5.789	.21*
31. Implement effective consultation & collaboration techniques	1.50	1.98	1.72	16.936	.002
32. Serve as advocate for individuals with exceptionalities & their families	1.36	1.81	1.80	15.963	.003
33. Respect and support students' self-advocacy rights	1.29	1.69	1.56	15.582	.003
34. Communicate & demonstrate a high standard of ethical practice	1.10	1.37	1.35	12.511	.01
35. Make decisions about students with exceptionalities based on open communication, trust, mutual respect	1.19	1.41	1.31	5.713	.22*

*Not significant at .05 or greater.

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Table 4

Percentages of Levels of Self-Reported Competencies

Group	Skilled	Adequate	Inadequate
Sp. Ed. Dir.	48%	44%	8%
Gen. Ed. Admin.	26%	56%	18%
Sp. Ed. Teachers	32%	48%	20%